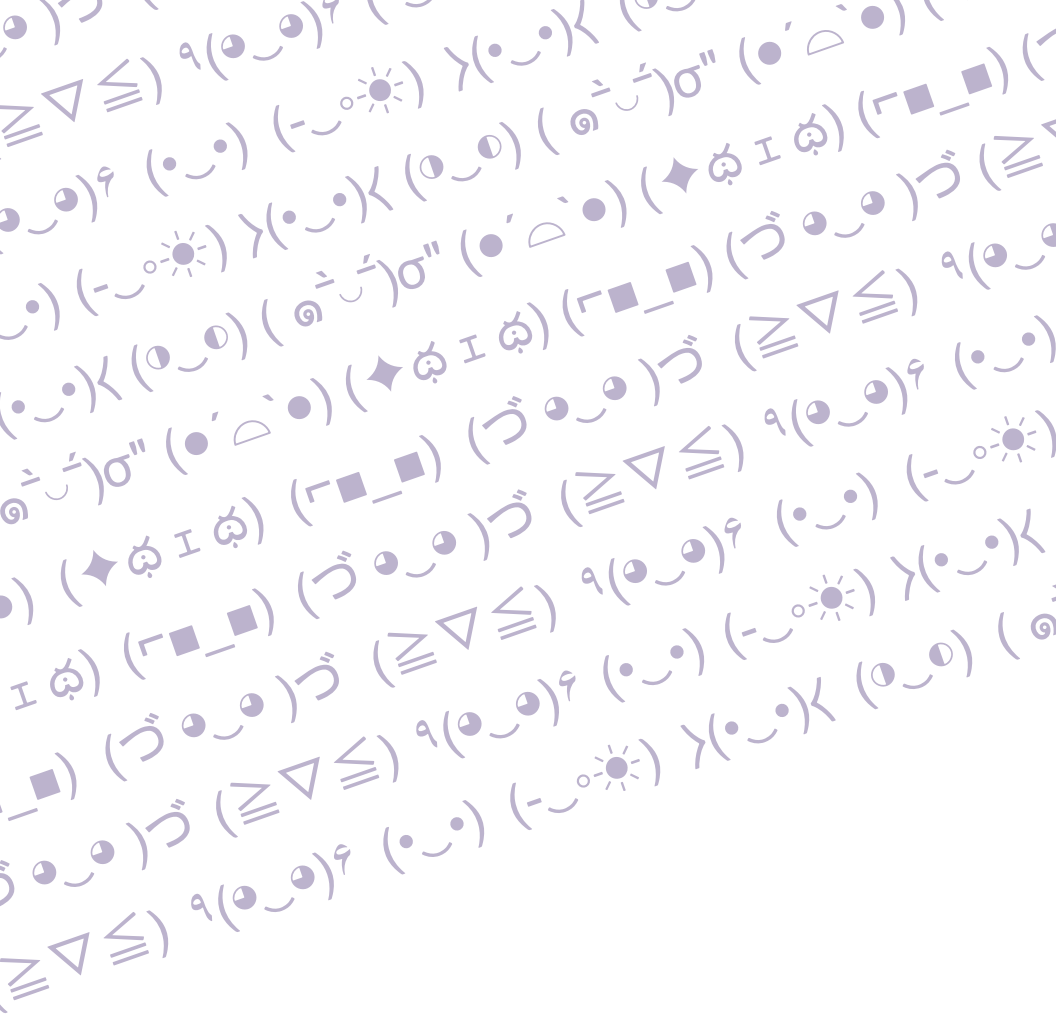




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## **Paper Mill Press 2024**

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# Table of Contents

## JESSIE DONALDSON

Sunburn, Not a Metaphor 9

## JULIA DALEY

Little Girl 10

## KERA LEIGHTS-ROSE

A July Wedding 11

## RAIN DRISCOLL

Her. 12

## JINMING YE

Loose Ye // Stitch Ye 14

## LOGAN ROPSON

Poetry from the Unqualified 15

First Time Coming Home 16

## KEL PARSONS

4AM (RITUAL) 19

Last One (ish) 20

Joiner III 21

## BRITTANY ELLSWORTH

Smoke 22

## MARIA AUCOIN

A Reason to Smile 24

## TESSA GRAHAM

Lilac Skies 28

Collecting Impressions: II 29

## JEREMY WILLS

I Love Your Eyes, My Dear 31

How Does it Feel to be One  
of the Beautiful People? 32

## BRAD MERCER

Home Again 33

## ABBY HATCHER

Flash II 42





**ZOEY DWYER**

Dive In 43

**CHARLOTTE SIEGL**

Cultures that Left a Mark 46

**RENEE SNOOK**

Harsh Landing 47

**LEAH M. FROUD**

the writing of love. 48  
heart. 49

**AMINA ACHIMUGU**

Instruments of Joy 50

**LUANNE DOMINIX**

North West Road by Car 52

**KIRA HORLICK**

Rot 53

**ISMAEL GOMEZCÁNA**

Leaving a Mark 57

**MADISON GRAHAM-BENOIT**

Poem Entry 2 58

**LUANNE DOMINIX**

Imposter Syndrome 60

**STEPHANIE ERNST**

Grief 61

We Contain Multitudes 63

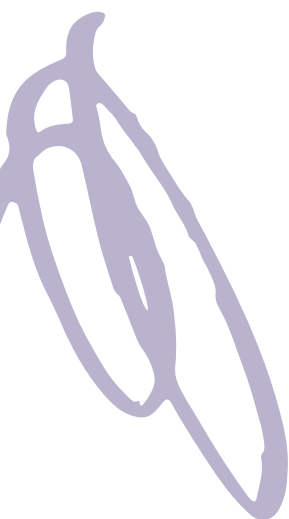
**JULIA DALEY**

The View 65

**TAYLOR CAVE**

Little One 66





# Jessie Donaldson

## Sunburn, Not a Metaphor

I let the sun burn my skin  
Sunblock, a hat, the shade of a tree  
These are boundaries I'm not ready to set

My nude body, the cloudless sky  
This is between the sun and I

# Julia Daley

## Little Girl

Little girl,  
They will try to tell you who to be.

They will tell you to never shout. Never curse.  
Never bite back.  
Always smile.  
Be the princess, not the knight.

Little Girl

Scream until the glass breaks.  
Curse until you have run out of words.  
Bite back. Hard.  
Show them your teeth. Your fight. Never let it go.  
Pick up the sword. Be the knight. The dragon slayer.

Little Girl,  
They will try to tell you who to be.

Do not listen.



# Kera Leights-Rose

## A July Wedding

Sometimes through sickness and health just isn't enough  
Kids are the only permanent mark of the past years.  
Eyes that were once filled with love, are now clouded in judgment.  
You tell your kids "he is a good dad," but wonder why he was  
    never good to you.  
You could have had the picture-perfect family, but the other  
    women smashed the frame.  
Now, you live in a town where you don't know the street names.  
You would have stayed together for the kids but he couldn't.  
You married their father for them and got left broken.  
And now, you are obligated to start all over again at 35.  
But sometimes, it is better to let him stand tall like the  
    *perfect man*.



# Rain Driscoll

Her.

It's nothing.

That's what you tell yourself.

It's nothing.

You feel the need to protect yourself.

To convince yourself that the fire she lights inside of you is nothing.

That the way you light up when she speaks is nothing.

That the ache you feel is nothing.

If there's nothing there,

Nothing can hurt.

But it's everything.

You're lying to yourself.

It's everything.

The walls you've built to protect yourself start to crack.

She burns need and want into you.

She makes your entire being light up like a jar of fireflies.

Your chest aches.

It's nothing.

That's not true.

It's nothing.

You're scared.

It's nothing.

It'll only make the pain worse.

It can't hurt if it's nothing.



You lay awake.  
It's everything.  
Your chest burns.  
It's everything.  
Your breath stills.  
She is everything.  
Your heart is pounding.  
This is everything.

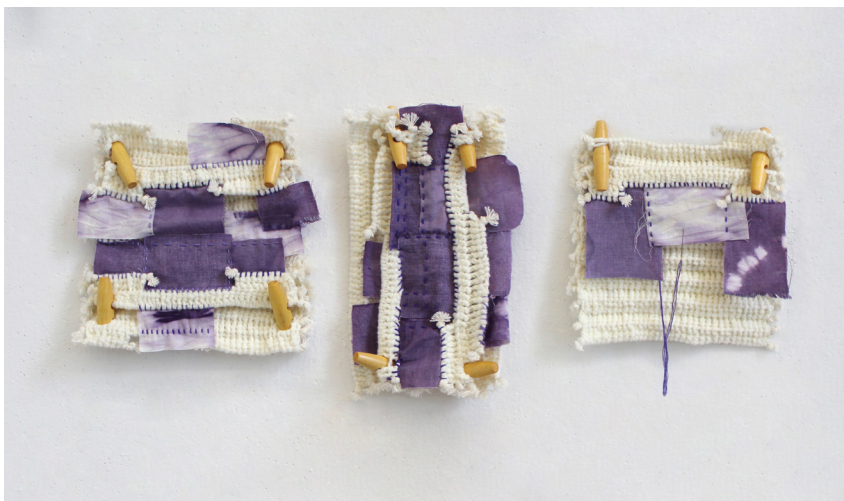


# Jinming Ye

Loose Ye



## Stitch Ye



# Logan Robson

## Poetry from the Unqualified

Tradition

strives to encapsulate us all.

We want to write under those pre-set rules

like Foucauldian prisoners,

without

any idea of free will.

From Dickens to Dickinson,

we blindly head for that tradition,

wondering about qualifications

for the standard is the standard, and the  
difference is

tyrannical

in its practice.

# Logan Ropson

## First Time Coming Home

Memories are so important to us. When we reflect, we see a snapshot into the past, a collection of our greatest hits, our one-way ticket back to everything we missed. Not long ago I asked my father about his favorite memory.

He said, “Son, I spent a lifetime making memories; my favorite is whatever is on my mind.” I thought about my father’s response and concluded that, in many ways, he was right. Memories work a lot like old books in that when you pull them off the shelf; you are transported to the fictional glamour of a well-lived life—the good stuff. Even now, writing on the kitchen table in my parents’ house on another weekend home from university reminds me of my past. The people, the atmosphere, the fresh air, it’s all the same as the first time I came home; at least, that is how I remember it.

6:00 am, December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2007, the plane touched down. I was so shocked when they rolled the staircase to the plane door. Icy steps led into the snow-covered tarmac. Today, I wonder how the pilots found the landing strip with snowflakes the size of Cheerios falling softly through the air and sticking to the ground like freshly flowing honey.

At that point, I was just a seven-year-old city kid proudly from Brantford, Ontario, wearing a neon orange tracksuit paired nicely with a Spiderman backpack. I just stood between the exit door and the descent, which would signal the first step into my new world, a place I would call home, and a walk that I would make hundreds more times, but these were the first steps in my life that would matter. Looking back

on those first strides down those slick stairs was like a prisoner walking free, a rebirth, a kid who found his home.

At that moment, though, I felt tired, worn out from travel, and excited for the reunion with my parents, who had flown home a few days earlier.

Walking down the stairs, holding my nan's hand, I quickly noticed I had never experienced anything like stepping off that plane in Deer Lake, Newfoundland. The embrace of the people, mothers hugging sons, fathers hugging daughters, rotational workers coming home for the holidays, surprise pick up of family members who just couldn't make it this year, and my family waiting by the luggage line. Pop hugged me tight, excited that we finally made it home, while Dad picked me up and placed me on his shoulders. A sense of joy filled us all, our first Christmas home.

All my family was from Hampden, Newfoundland, but my parents moved away when they were young. My grandparents moved to Ontario when my mom was 16 in search of work. My dad graduated high school in Hampden but left for the mainland at 17. Fast forward to what they would call a lifetime, and the newlyweds had a son with one goal in mind: moving home. This was their moment, and I could feel it even then; the excitement illuminated every Christmas bulb on the old spruce that took up most of the airport atrium.

Once the initial excitement of the reunion concluded, my family collected our luggage. Traveling with Nan was always an event, but when that gift-filled suitcase made its



way down the conveyor belt, like a snowplow clearing the runways for the next incoming flight, the feeling of excitement where just as high as the day we packed it. I remember the strain in my grandfather's eyes when he gave the initial pluck; I remember the laugh coming over my father as he noticed the zipper giving its all to keep closed. We loaded the big suitcase onto the luggage cart and stacked my little bag, which Nan had stuffed like a Christmas turkey, on top of it. Dad picked me up and placed me on the cart as well. From there, we made our way to the exit door.\\

Outside, I was met with a light snowfall and a cool morning breeze that felt cleaner on my skin than any breeze I had ever experienced. As Pop and Dad loaded the bags into the pick-up truck, I climbed in the back seat, stuffed my sweater behind my head, listened to Newfoundland Christmas music play, and drifted off to sleep.

This was my first time coming home.

# Kel Parsons

## 4AM (RITUAL)

peeling back greyed caulking

Tough

like last year's chewing gum

test the limits until

Finally

it snaps,

gives way

like last year's back

a nail beat into the baseboard with a cracked heel

a thread stripped,

Bare

From not knowing when to stop

gooey comfort

in the brand new centimeter

between the bathtub

and the rotten wood

crumpling to control

atop my

God-Given

PermaGrime

# Kel Parsons

Last One (ish)



Digital Photography Collage, 2023.



### Joiner III



Digital Photography Collage, 2023.

# Brittany Ellsworth

## Smoke

What are you staring at he asks  
Through a drag on the cigarette  
Suspended from his tar-stained lips  
Watching the smoke from the mill  
I reply, mesmerized by the silent messages  
Being written in the sky

Following my gaze, the smoke is cleaner now  
Flicking the ash with practiced fingers  
They filter all the toxins out of it

It's not even really smoke anymore  
Just steam, he says through an exhale  
Grinds the butt with the heel of his boot

Watching his silhouette  
Shrink into the horizon as he walks away  
My eyes scan the vista before me

Rolling hills covered in late summer leaves  
The colour of their intent mirrored  
In the glassy surface of the obsidian ocean

The serpentine river winding through  
The bones of the land, its bottom lined with  
muddy memories of a forgotten time

Echoes of pulp wood piled in the boom  
Mixed with the groans of loggers  
Who traded blood, sweat and tears for pennies

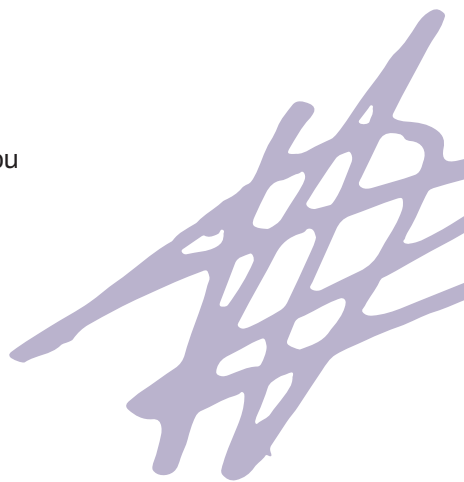
The irony of risking life to live  
Ignoring the dangers lurking at the surface  
Blindly towing the company line

It may appear to be sterile steam rising  
To join the symphony of cirrostratus playing  
In the sky over this quiet industry town

But, like words unsaid, malignancies undetected  
Invisible toxins silently floating,  
Flowing freely to the sky and sea

Just because you can't hear it, see it,  
Taste it, touch it  
Doesn't mean it's not slowly killing you

Smoke



# Maria Aucoin

## A Reason to Smile

“You realize you don’t smile, right?”

That’s what woke me up: A random girl who decided to sit down beside me at the bar, who dressed like she was on a date with some rich jerk three times her age, and who you would’ve expected to try and pick a fight with someone for looking at her wrong. Instead, she plopped down at my side and tried to start a conversation. I had just gotten off another 14 hour shift at a job I hated, and wanted to feel something before I went home. I had been ignoring most of her small talk and was barely keeping my eyes open when she said that.

“Excuse me?”

“You don’t smile. You’d be a lot prettier if you did.”

“I don’t think you’ve noticed, hun, but I’m not here to look pretty. I just want my beer.”

“Yeah, but you COULD be pretty, so why not try?”

I raised my gaze from the pint that was nearly empty and looked her dead in the eyes, flashing a toothy grin.

“Not like that!” She threw a teasingly repulsed look at me, not getting what she wanted. “You need to mean it. Like this,” her rosy cheeks pushed up when she smiled, dimples emphasizing her cheeriness. You could’ve mistaken her for being a doll with her happiness and smooth skin.

“Yeah, well, what if I don’t want to right now? Or what if I don’t have a reason to smile?”

“Come on, girly. You definitely at least have one reason to. What about your family?”

“Haven’t talked to them in 2 years.”

“...Okay, well what about your friends?”

“I wouldn’t be here by myself if I had any.” I pushed my empty glass towards the bartender and pulled back my stool to get up. “Now if you excuse me, I need to be going no-“

“No!” She yelled loud enough to have a few head turns toward us, and for the bartender to pass a concerned glance. “I am not letting you leave here until we find you a reason to smile!”

“Listen, I respect the gesture, but I don’t think you’re going to have any luck. Now I need to head to bed. I have a shift tomorrow morning at 6.”

She stared at me, dumbfounded, but eventually gave in.

“Fine, but you’re not escaping me that easily. Give me your phone number, we can meet up another time and find your smile.”

I rolled my eyes. Of course she wanted my number, probably so that she could give it to any of the guys who were bound to hit on her after I left. That didn’t stop me from giving in, but in hindsight, I should have said no. I didn’t even know her yet.

She started clicking it into her phone, before pausing it.

“You never gave me your name, girlie.”

“...Axel.”

“Awww, such a pretty name for a pretty girl.”

I disregarded her comment as she finished putting me into her contact. By the time she put her phone away, mine buzzed, message from unknown sender “*i’ll have u smiling by the end of the week :)*”

“There. Now you’ll be hearing from me by tomorrow morning, and I will be expecting a response from you, understand?”

I rolled my eyes at her, yet still agreed. She surely was determined, I’d give her that.

“Thanks, uh...”

“Winter,” I bit my tongue from pointing out the irony of her name, “and don’t you dare forget it.”

“Alright, yep, thanks for the pep talk, but I really need to go. I’ll see you around.” I didn’t let her get another word in; even if I wanted to, I still had work the next day and did not want to be exhausted. It was already almost 10. I pulled my phone out to call a cab when I saw her notification again. She really did want to make me happy, huh? I put her name into my phone and then carried on to call the taxi.

It didn’t take long for it to arrive, and before I knew it, I was home in my tiny apartment and the mess I left it in. “*The laundry needs to be done*” I made a mental note of as I threw my hoodie, plain white t-shirt and working pants into the hamper. “*Dishes too.*” I poured myself a glass of water, downed it all in one gulp, then brought another with me to bed.

My room was one of the few clean areas in my flat, as I enjoyed keeping my “office” tidy for the one day a week I got to work from home and do virtual inventory and the one day a week I had off to catch up on sleep.

Keys, wallet, and water on the desk, alarm set for 5 am, and a quick brush of my teeth and hair later, I was ready to finally rest for the few hours that I could. I went to plug in my phone when I noticed another notification.

Winter: *"hey, I'm happy I got to meet u tonight. maybe we could go out for brunch this weekend?"* I was planning to decline; I knew I was working all weekend, but before I could she added *"my treat :) don't worry about the money"*.

With a sigh, I responded *"I'll have to talk with my boss to see if I can get the day off, but if so, sure."*

Winter: *"alright pretty girl, i will see you saturday :)"*

Phone plugged in, I rolled into bed, where the audacity of this girl raddled through my brain. Me, pretty? She must have been tipsy before she got a good look at me. It made me laugh, the ridiculousness of it all, as a small grin came to my lips. I barely knew her, yet I already knew she didn't need to give me a reason to smile; at that moment, she was already enough.

# Tessa Graham

Lilac Skies





# Tessa Graham

## Collecting Impressions: II

How would you impersonate light?

The steady receding warmth as the sun falls low  
leaving golden hour tones  
to shift in their soles, slowly turning to silence.

The absence of percussion.  
The beat of day.

The cadence of light  
reverberating  
through life lit up by the sun.

The lilting scent of lilacs  
in sun now shifted to shadow  
your focus turned from one sense to another.

Wind on ankles brings attention to  
the cooled sweat between your toes  
the impression of what daylight brought.

And what it will bring again.

The wind and it's impressions  
can only be felt, not collected

Only remembered  
by how it looks

On others, towards others  
through things.

What a beautiful and tragic way to be remembered.



# Jeremy Wills

I Love Your Eyes, My Dear



# Jeremy Wills

How Does it Feel  
to be One of the Beautiful People?



# Brad Mercer

## Home Again

As a child, I stared at the tapestry  
that hung on my grandfather's wall;  
back then, I called it a blanket,  
reminiscent of my mother's quilts,  
a hobby she took up for fun,  
to kill time on mat leave, rather than  
a matter of necessity.

*He was only twenty-four himself,  
trying to get through an M.A. he  
never did finish. Dropped out before  
second year, offered the  
second-in-charge after Murphy's  
uncle took sick as his final exams  
began and was buried before the  
marks came back, chose the money  
over the fear of chasing dreams he  
feared may never come to fruition.*

It was surreal, this moment; the end  
of one era, the beginning of a time  
unfamiliar to him.

Waiting on his father to return  
to the car made him think about  
his own career, of which he was  
halfway through, having resigned  
to the position life had put him in,

which allowed him to grow and  
gave him the comfort he desired.  
It wasn't the path he would have chosen,  
not in a million fucking years,  
sitting in a cubicle assessing risk and  
actuarial tables, strategizing  
investment portfolios, balancing  
budgets to save the livelihoods  
of his colleagues, vowing not  
to let himself become a part of  
corporate life that he resented,  
neglecting the humanity in the  
decisions made each day. He still  
felt a hot wave across the back of  
his neck, more embarrassment than  
shame or humiliation, when he  
would find himself lost in thought  
pondering what his teenage self  
would think about how things  
had turned out.

Like her mother and all the mothers before her.

I stared at the yellowed corners, stained  
from years in an old basement pub.  
Smouldering butts in custom-made ashtrays,  
a cartoon beer mug dousing lipstick-stained  
and beer-soaked filters,  
smoke passing through the rooms,  
through the cracks in the foundations,

and passing each fibre along the way,  
leaving its mark  
as we all hope to do before we leave this place.

*Dreams of being some kind of writer.  
Whatever that meant anymore.  
Print media was in the big cities  
and he could never imagine living  
in a condo on Yonge, looking out  
over the city as it woke up each  
morning and feeling part of something  
bigger than he could conceive.  
It was a cityscape, a vision,  
a dream he could barely connect  
with any longer; having long since  
been put out like liquor bottles  
on a Sunday morning, blue bag  
collecting rain water  
waiting to be picked up,  
taken away, made into something more,  
to live on as a candelabra  
or chandelier or more likely  
another bottle of locally-sourced swill.*

His father mused, as the day drew  
to a close, if he would always feel  
this way, if he would feel the hot  
wave as he made his final exit into  
retirement, the golden stage one

always awaits with bated breath  
knowing it could vanish at any  
moment in a span of thirty five years,  
the moment he was about to watch  
his father step out into.

Into the bar, one last time;  
exit stage left and onwards to  
the next chapter of life,  
uncertain if it was time but knowing  
when to hang up your apron.

*He tried to listen carefully to those  
around him, to learn lessons from  
their experience rather than making  
his own messes in the middle of  
a Friday night rush. He took the advice  
of those before him,  
never hire a friend,  
the fear of having to throw  
a dead-beat childhood pal  
to the curb, keeping his staff  
at arm's length socially,  
getting to know them but never  
letting them into his inner monologues,  
drinking with them but never staying  
too late, here in a sense,  
over there in another.*



*The lovely older couple who had hired  
him off the streets, resume in hand,  
not a tick of experience but knew  
how to keep glasses clean,  
years of being babysat  
by a grandmother  
who showed him the importance  
of order and organization,  
how to take lipstick stains off of  
glassware, leftovers from tea  
after mass with the choir ladies.  
It was as if he had always  
been preparing for this.  
Serving, waiting on hand and foot,  
was to create the ambiance, to  
set the scene for other's memories.  
He would choose this admirable outlook,  
even on the days when he felt squished  
or belittled by unkind or drunk strangers.*

He heard the echo of his father's voice  
through the window.

Containing pieces of his past  
his love, his work, his passions  
his hand rested atop my shoulder  
& I asked, "why does this hang  
on your wall? shouldn't it  
keep you warm instead?"

*He stared beyond them,  
above them, eyes forward  
on the tapestry that hung  
opposite the bar.  
Faded, smoke-tinged,  
the white and grey spiral  
pattern embedded within yellowed  
from smoke and airborne ash.*

“Ten to the hour, last call!”,  
ringing like tinnitus in his ears,  
familiar. He has watched his  
father, over the coming weeks,  
silently ponder the silence in  
the weeks to come as he grew  
more familiar with the world beyond.

Beyond all he had known,  
check-lists day in and out,  
prep, schedule, opening floats.  
Preparing for what was to come.

There would be no prepping any longer,  
no more stock orders, no counts,  
no deposits, no last-minute scheduling  
changes, no more covering for a  
part-timer who was obviously  
face-and-eyes into a mirror  
and feigning a sniffle or cough  
over the phone. His father



had asked to work one last closing shift,  
a week after his farewell party,  
had asked to go out on  
one last night just like all the others.  
Something to remember it by,  
nothing extraordinary,  
same faces, their usual seats,  
familiar orders, an inside joke or two,  
someone just sneaking  
in a drink after work before heading  
home to the wife and inlaws with a  
waiting DVR, the son of an old friend  
from high school telling stories  
their folks had shared about the old  
afterhours, the debauchery, the mayhem,  
the heartache and self growth,  
the very nature of life in all stages,  
from all classes and walks of life.

My cheeks  
still burn when I remember asking,  
my naive heart,  
his gentle soul.

*He took a deep breath and, as he exhaled,  
felt the comfort of the bar-hands  
who had come before him;  
composed, collected,  
and ready for the road ahead.*

*Day in, day out, he stared beyond  
them to the tapestry. He thought of  
where he had been  
and where he'd landed.*

“But it does keep me warm.  
There’s an old saying that says  
you can never really go home,  
and it’s true.”

The door swung open. The familiar silhouette,  
too proud to look back, strode forward  
with a long fabric draped over  
his shoulder. He sat, as always,  
in the rear passenger seat of the car  
enjoying the leg room.

...

As they passed beneath a glowing billboard,  
illuminating the world around them,  
lighting up the road that lay beyond them  
at three in the morning,  
his father finally spoke as though  
answering a question he had never been asked:

“When you’re running a business,  
you always have to keep looking forward.  
Learn from your mistakes, but always  
stay focused on fixing the problem

at hand and moving forward. Every  
second you dwell is another second  
you keep yourself from progressing.  
God willing, there'll be plenty of time  
to look back on it all one day.  
And it'll be worth the wait, bud.  
You won't believe the life you'll build  
if you keep looking forward."

The leaves crackled beneath the tires as it sped  
away, flung wildly along a trajectory  
unknown.

"But this'll do. This'll do for now,"  
he whispered  
staring onward and inward  
to days gone by,  
leaving a gap of twenty seven years  
before I understood,  
thirty four years before I found someone  
that would bring me, too, home again.

*He wondered where he'd someday find himself.*

*"This'll do. For now," he thought.*

## Flash II



# Zoey Dwyer

## Dive In

When I was a young boy, my parents sometimes liked to joke that I was half-fish. They'd tell stories of me as an infant splashing around in the tub, hiking up their water bill, or staring at an aquarium for hours on end, never getting bored. It only made sense for me to be put into swimming lessons where I advanced so quickly that my mom thought the instructor was only passing me because she was his professor in university, and he didn't want to get on her bad side.

It wasn't long before I found the outdoor swimming pool a couple of blocks down from my home. I used to drag my dad there nearly every day until both he and my mom deemed me old enough to go on my own.

That pool was where I fell in love for the first time. I was twelve, in the deep end, and trying to see how long I could hold my breath underwater—away from the interfering lifeguard who hadn't noticed me yet.

And there she was: wearing a bright red, one-piece swimsuit in the shallow end, completely dunked in the water, cheeks puffed out like a blowfish. Her eyes zeroed in on mine, her shape fluctuating beneath the blue water. We smiled at each other before the moment was broken and the lifeguard began telling me off, his voice muffled from being above water.

Afterwards, I didn't talk to her, but I eavesdropped on her conversation with the friends she had brought to the pool. She told her blonde friend that she'd like to marry a writer because it seemed "utterly romantic."

Back home, I wrote my first short story about a whale becoming friends with a krill. It ends when the krill gets too close, and the whale accidentally inhales it.

That night, I fell in love for a second time.

My writing had started with trying to impress a girl, but it turned out to be more than that. When I sat back from my pages full of scrawlings, it was nearly unbelievable to me that I had written, at least what I thought was, a masterpiece.

My whole body was thrumming with an energy that I had only experienced when I found myself swimming in the pool on autopilot, in the zone. This story was my creation. And creating was addictive.


On my 50th birthday, my mother gifted me a hand-bound book of poems and short stories I wrote as a child. I nearly teared up, sitting in my armchair, with my eight-year-old granddaughter looking at me curiously.

When I explained the book to her, I saw a familiar expression flicker onto her face as she flipped through the worn pages, her eyes skipping over them like stones over water. When she looked over at me, I knew her whole body was electric. This moment was her beginning.

I had many things I wanted to tell her about writing, but I managed to bite my tongue so as not to overwhelm her with my “old man” talk. In my head, I wrote out a list of things I would eventually tell her: that writing is like diving into the







deep end of a pool, the water distorting just how far the end is; that you never *really* come out the other side—there'll always be something else you want to add and there will always be a pesky typo, no matter how many times it's looked over—you just choose when to start swimming to the surface.

I would tell her that you can't please everyone, but there would be no swimming metaphors to explain that because I can't think of a sufficient one to fit. I'd tell her that you'll be too highbrow for some people and too lowbrow for others, so just write what you like because there will be people who will cherish it.

I didn't tell her any of that. Instead, when she tried to hand the book to me, I pushed it back towards her and said, "Dive in."

## Cultures that Left a Mark



# Renee Snook

## Harsh Landing

Glancing out the window at the sterling white clouds—  
my classmate in the window seat closes the cover—doze  
off—the overhead speaker—severe weather, unexpected  
stop in Toronto—murmurs travelling through the cabin—  
minor detour and everything will be fine—passengers  
moaning—time slows—frequent beeping  
overhead—symbols flashing—keep your seatbelts on—  
thunderstorm—severe—the floor drops beneath us, over  
and over, dropping begins blending with wobbling—going  
down, left and right, tipping back and forth, staggering—  
shuffling—drilling sound—wind damage—vibrations  
of the floor—window cover pops open—hands shaking,  
can't close it—peers' legs shaking—the boy behind  
me shaking, urging—the whole aircraft shaking—the  
cabin in uproar—a tilt forward, a dive down—wind  
slaps the aircraft—whining, puking—stumbling for the  
runway—rain clacks—We breakthrough!—flashes in the  
sky—a jolt—pavement—screeching halt—water flicking:  
Breathing. Grounding. Relief.

# Leah M. Froud

*the writing of love.*

—

I want the kind of love that Shakespeare wrote about,  
the kind you'd die for,  
the kind you'd travel to the ends of the earth for,  
the kind that inspires other people's stories.

I want the kind of love that Dickinson wrote about,  
the kind you'd hope for,  
the kind you'd yearn for,  
the kind that's passionate.

I want the kind of love that Sappho wrote about,  
the kind you'd live for,  
the kind you'd be yourself for,  
the kind that's unfiltered.

I want the love that  
the playwrights,  
the authors,  
the poets,  
and the musicians  
all wrote about.

## ***heart.***

—

to the girl with her heart on her sleeve  
who was so naïve to believe  
that the world would not make her bleed.  
for the crimson stains on her shirt  
are from a bleeding wound  
of a heart that's hurt.  
she stitched it up  
nerves ran raw  
in a shadowed room  
in which no one saw.  
her cry and weep  
the wound ran deep.  
the girl with her heart on her sleeve  
was lulled to sleep  
for her heart  
had stopped to beat.



# Amina Achimugu

## Instruments of Joy

Newfoundland, there lies a stick  
quite ugly, quite thick  
passed through many years  
its appearance brings many tears  
Ugly Stick, they call you  
a makeshift instrument  
household odds and ends  
may not be a sight to see  
played right it's harmony,  
jangles, clatters, bangs,  
Tap a beat  
Tell a story  
Dance a step with two left feet  
Sing a song  
Watch the bottle cap clang  
Ringing small bells

Struck by a piece of wood  
Long stick with female head  
Rubber boots attached  
ugly stick you make music sang  
From kitchen parties to ceilidhs  
ugly stick tried and true  
bring folks together  
Side by side  
fill the room with laughter,  
melodious stick  
You should be called  
Joyful noise from humble parts  
Tales of old and modern arts,  
Each knock and thump, a memory born,  
In your rhythm, spirits adorn,  
Newfoundland's heart, in every chord.

# Luanne Dominix

North West Road by Car



Watercolour on paper, 2022.



# Kira Horlick

## Rot

There exists a wicked disease in the hearts of man, boiling over like a pot on a woodstove, filling the lifeless body with horrible feelings. We have no fancy, smart name for it; no doctor can diagnose it, no scientist can find it. In the forests, we simply call it “rot.”

It begins in the heart, but the heart never shows a sign. When you’ve been infected, you do not know until it crawls up the arteries (for it never chooses an easy way out), and settles in the lungs. From there it grows, tendrils of fungi inching up the bronchial tubes, mushrooms bursting from the insides and growing outwards. Your body detests the rot; it wants it out, it wants it out. It forces cough after cough, fighting in vain to get rid of what has always been there. But not a mushroom comes out.

Blood does.

It bursts from the lungs and escapes into the body, crawling across cell walls and bones like some kind of sentient creature. It settles wherever it may like; often the stomach. In its new home, with the lungs in tatters, the rot chooses to grow something new, something beautiful. Inside the body grows flowers; wolfsbane, asphodel, lilies, hydrangeas. As the fungus eats your lungs, piece by piece, your other organs wither as the flowers drain all the strength from them, all to feed their own growth.

And once they’ve had their fill, together, the fungi and the flowers crawl, hand in hand, up the spine, to the castle that lies above: the brain.

Try as we might, man has never truly understood the trigger for the rot. It lives inside the hearts of all men, we know as much. But we do not understand what causes it to burst into the lungs and eat them alive, sprouting colourful mushrooms and flowers, infecting every inch of the body. Nor do we know *why* we all contain this disease, or of a way to survive it.

The rot is eternal, of course. As far as humanity knows, we have always been rotten.

Scarcely alive, the body is decaying from the inside out, consumed by the rot. Now, as the wicked disease races up the spine and inside the mind, the body begins its final defences, its last stand against the rot.

Fever.

As the body falls and the temperature rises, the rot approaches the brain. It grows hungrier by the minute, crawling closer and closer to what will become its last meal. Flowers and mushrooms cease growing at the very end of the spinal cord as the rot infects the cerebellum; there is nothing left to eat. It is hungry, so hungry, yet there is so little of the body left, so much withered and decayed, that it must starve. The heat of your fever chips away at it; the mushrooms wither in the lungs, the flowers wilt under the feeling. But it persists like a stubborn child, and crawls into the brain.

Inside your head, the rot smiles, like an ancient dragon gazing upon its golden hoard. It curls around the brain, snaking through each part like it knows your mind better than you do. And once it is inside, it sprouts something new, something unnamed; the true form of the rot.

What comes out of the heads of patients dying of rot is horrific. It is purple in nature; not a lovely shade of lilac or wisteria, but the colour of a painful bruise, a diseased wound. It sprouts chunks of itself, tiny pieces of dark, purple flesh, pulsating as if it were alive. It makes sounds when cut, sounds of gurgling and bubbling. And the liquid! Inside each strand is a foul-smelling, crimson substance, pouring out in comical amounts, staining the floors a bright red. It is thought to be blood, but no one is sure of what nature the blood is.

Fever drives the body to do strange things. You will be ill, and violently so; coughing and vomiting, and only able to produce blood. The fungi and the flowers remain, eating you up, as you spew out pieces of your own flesh. Death becomes a release, a way to get away from what cannot be cured, from what has always existed. But you cannot escape; the rot is always within you.

Patients typically die after a few weeks. Some make it to three months, but once the rot sets in, it is difficult to keep a human alive. It is, admittedly, rare, though once a case is known, paranoia begins to spread. Just like rot, this disease spreads fast, crawling through the ears of man and into the heart, causing it to pound harder and harder, waiting for what is believed to be the inevitable death. But unlike rot, this disease is nowhere near as deadly, and is curable, albeit with great difficulty.

Victims of the rot are thought to go insane towards the end; granted, this is because of their high fevers and the disease in their brains. They are known to spout prophecies, to speak to the dead, to see the future, and to see things of an indescribable nature. Most of these people die, tragically, in the throes of madness.

We understand so little about the rot, and yet, we have a strange faith that one of these days, a smart doctor from the big city will slap a name on it, diagnose it, cure it, and rid us of all of this wickedness that lives inside us.



# Ismael Gomezcăna

Leaving a Mark



# Madison Graham-Benoit

## Poem Entry 2

I am a mosquito  
Small, fragile, and easily missed  
Underestimated in every way  
My humming drowned in the cacophony of the world  
We know humans better than they know us  
We listen to their whispers and their heartbeats  
We know their ill intentions in advance  
And fly away before they can think of catching us

We prefer the darkness  
Our wings move through the air with a whispered symphony  
As we disappear into the shadows

We are not just a shadowy blur in the air  
We are the apex predators  
More deadly than great snakes, lions, and bears  
We are not the biggest, the fastest, or the strongest  
But our swarms are swirling masses of life  
A storm that cannot be stopped

My hunger is insatiable and my thirst,  
Unquenchable

My bite is small but mighty  
I am an itch that cannot be ignored  
I am a creature of the night  
A dancer in the shadows

For every time I am swatted away  
I will return once more

# Luanne Dominix

Imposter Syndrome



Watercolour on paper, 2021.



# Stephanie Ernst

## Grief

I live with a jury of ghosts.  
They do not speak.  
Their silence suffocates.

Here is my grief:  
Its hands wrapped tight around my throat.

Tell me:  
Do I make you proud?  
Tell me.  
*Tell me.*

I scream myself hoarse,  
But it doesn't matter.  
These dead are mine to bear,  
Shadows of lives  
half  
-lived  
Boulders to bird-boned shoulders.

Memories of yellowed eyes  
And the sound of ribs *cracking*  
Beneath a rasping cough.

Uncertainty clouds my lungs.  
Would you love me as I am now?  
I will never know.

Here is the truth of grief:  
Sometimes what hurts more than the loss  
    Is the unanswered questions  
    And the image of them in your mind  
    As it blurs,  
    Distorts,  
Until you no longer recall the sound of their voice  
                    Or if they loved you at all.



# Stephanie Ernst

## We Contain Multitudes

What is love but understanding

But a desire to understand and be understood in turn

To look at someone and know more about them than what you don't

Here you are

You were thirteen when your tonsils were taken out,

Sixteen when you had your first kiss,

And there's a scar on your left hand because you can't be trusted  
to make toast

Here is the profound, the mundane

All that you are is miraculous to me

That all these small things could come together and form a person

This wondrous being whose hands I would place my heart into

Without question

I would learn all that you are,

Every scar and the story behind.

What is humanity but looking at someone and knowing

They hold universes within them that you will never understand

The same as you.

We contain multitudes which are ever expanding,

Growing with every breath.

# Julia Daley

The View



# Taylor Cave

## Little One

Be patient, little one  
One day the big, big world will be yours  
Be patient, little one  
One day you'll get to do what all the grown-ups do  
And I know you're tired of waiting  
But just please wait a little longer  
I promise you your time will come

It's ok, little one  
The world can hurt you sometimes  
But you'll be alright  
It's ok, little one  
I know the monsters can be scary  
But you don't have to worry  
You'll see the monsters don't like the light

Hey there, little one  
You really aren't so little anymore  
Hey there, little one  
Promise me you won't change too much  
And I know it's easy to lose yourself  
But just try not to lose your light  
I promise you'll find people who love you for who you are

Goodbye, little one  
You've grown so much  
I barely recognize who you are  
Goodbye, little one  
Please remember what I've told you  
God, I wish we had more time  
And I know this journey will be tough  
But just remember you are strong  
I promise you'll be alright by dawn



John